

Not just a lot of old books : relationship management through engagement with library collections

Paper delivered at the Relationship Management in Higher Education Conference, November 2017

“Informing our communities, informed by our collections”

In 2014, we developed a strapline for our newly relaunched Library Academic Support Team at the University of Edinburgh. We chose “Informing our communities, informed by our collections” to express our vision that as subject liaison librarians, collections are at the heart of our primary purpose. When in 2017, the Library Academic Support team moved within the Information Services Group structure at the University of Edinburgh from the Library User Services Division, into the Library and University Collections division, this further enhanced our connections with our collections management colleagues. While the collections that we engage with are increasingly digital, we remain surrounded by a legacy of very substantial print collections – nearly four million books, across multiple library sites. We work with our colleagues in the Centre for Research Collections (CRC) to support engagement with the University’s rare book, manuscript and object collections. For some Academic Support Librarians, local collections of Special Collections at site libraries fall within our remit. For others, there are opportunities to extend the reach of our CRC colleagues by promoting these collections and offering opportunities to engage with them in the context of their own subject communities. As Academic Support Librarians we are charged with both being advocates for the collections that support our subject areas, and realising their value so that they can earn their keep for the University. Drawing on the experience of Academic Support Librarians at the University of Edinburgh, this paper will look at strategies for effective relationship management with printed collections.

Bringing inside collections out

One of the challenges of realising the value of legacy printed collections is their discoverability. Older printed collections may be held on floors not usually penetrated by undergraduates or in closed stack areas. Special Collections which must be kept in secure storage are out of sight and invisible. How can we bring these inside collections out?

- **Libguides.** The Academic Support Librarians at Edinburgh have recently been developing their subject guide pages using LibGuides software, and been able to incorporate images of Special Collections items into these guides as well as information about using closed stack collections. Clear and prominent information is included about services for collections held off site.
- **Working with course organisers.** We are beginning to explore working with course organisers to identify Special Collections materials from University of Edinburgh collections that could be digitised to include as course readings on online course resource lists, using Leganto. For instance, Dr Stephen McDowall in History used the University of Edinburgh’s earliest printed book, *Zhouyi zhuan yi da quan* printed 1440 for his course “Ming China (1368-1644) and its Cultural Legacy”



Zhouyi zhuan yi da quan (1440)

We also work with Special Collections to facilitate collections access for class groups. For instance, a first year UG course, *Medieval Worlds: A Journey through the Middle Ages* made extensive use of the Hereford Mappa Mundi. The Academic Support Librarian for History worked with course organisers and the Centre for Research Collections to enable group access on a rota basis to a high quality facsimile.

- **Promotion.** As Academic Support Librarians, we work to bring these inside collections out into view through social media, banners, leaflets and postcards and Pop Up Library sessions in Schools.

Collections for creative learning

Academic Support Librarians who are based in site libraries are well placed to exploit the possibilities of the collections serving the communities at those sites. For instance, as Academic Support Librarian for Divinity, I facilitated a workshop for the University's Innovative Learning Week on 'Building the Temple of Jerusalem'. With a member of academic staff, the Second Temple Judaism class built a historic model of the Temple which was part of a local collection. The students were engaged and enthusiastic, and were able to work as a team to identify whether the model was accurate and complete



Building the Temple of Jerusalem workshop.

The Academic Support Librarian for the Edinburgh College of Art takes a leading role in facilitating creative learning with the collections, through displays and workshops. This has included running a hands-on book making workshop with the Artist in Residence, as part of an artists' books research residency at Edinburgh College of Art Library.

Collections for student champions

At the University of Edinburgh we've taken opportunities to make collections part of fostering student engagement. When students arrive at the University, opportunities to see Special Collections items as part of student induction tours. Feedback tells us that this enhances the student experience and makes the library induction memorable. If you can, including Special Collections as part of student induction has a real 'wow' factor – even if the students involved don't go ahead to use Special Collections further.

Students have the opportunity to be 'guest curator' in small displays which allows them to highlight collection items of interest to them, on an academic or a personal level. There are opportunities for our students to work with us on volunteer placements and internships, and these are in high demand from students. We find that when students are able to be engaged with the library collections in this way, there are benefits to other areas of library engagement. These students come away with a deeper understanding of the library and are prepared to act as our champions and be approached for further library interaction in focus groups and surveys.

Collections for academic engagement

Academic Support Librarians are trusted colleagues within the Schools and Colleges of the University, and they are often called upon to support tours and displays of library collections for visitors and VIPs. This kind of collection engagement serves to enhance the Library's prestige and reputation within academic departments, and potentially to attract investment to the University from potential partners and donors.

The University of Edinburgh has a strategy for collection engagement through a regular exhibition programme, and Academic Support Librarians are able to contribute to exhibitions on topics from the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation to educational testing and Ladybird books. Creating an exhibition requires academic partnerships which Academic Support Librarians are well placed to

forge. Exhibitions are a really exciting way to bring collections to light, placing collection items which may come from different library collections together to shed new light on research and teaching. Visitor numbers and feedback from exhibitions are excellent evidence of the impact of library collections.

The Academic Support Librarian team chose the strapline “Informing our communities, informed by our collections” because for us, collections are at the heart of the Library experience that they support. We believe that as Academic Support Librarians we can use collections to:

- Demonstrate the value of our collections
- Increase student engagement
- Form academic partnerships
- Creatively collaborate with Special Collections colleagues

In these ways, Academic Support Librarians are well placed to deliver engagement with library collections to the communities they serve and to use them as a resource alongside digital collections to enhance our relationship building activities.

Christine Love-Rodgers
Academic Support Librarian (Divinity, Social and Political Science)
Library & University Collections, University of Edinburgh